**The wisdom of Narcissus: Martianus Capella, vanity and learning as a glorification of the self**

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the educational thought of Martianus Capella, a fifth-century Carthaginian writer, through his only surviving work *The Marriage of Mercury and Philology*. The didactic handbook is an ode to learning, adorning a faltering introduction to the liberal arts with baroque mythological ornamentation. The paper highlights Capella's unique approach to the liberal arts, framed within a Neo-Platonic context, that views learning as a means of embellishment, self-glorification and ascension. The paper discusses the allegorical elements of Capella's text, interpretations of its significance, and its implications for the modern academic, particularly regarding the interplay between the pursuit of knowledge and vanity.

*Keywords*: Martianus Capella, vanity, late antiquity, higher education, liberal arts

It is to the same class of mythological allegory that I would assign the work of another writer, if I felt sure that any classification could hold him; for this universe, which has produced the bee-orchid and the giraffe, has produced nothing stranger than Martianus Capella. C.S. Lewis (1963, p.78)

C.S Lewis was right to identify the oddness of Martianus Minneus Felix Capella (370 A.D.(?) -420 A.D.(?)). Capella lived in rural outskirts of Cathage, was of limited education and modest status, yet was responsible for composing the most prolific liberal arts textbook of the Middle Ages *The Marriage of Mercury and Philology (De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii)*. *De Nuptiis* is an introduction to the liberal arts that couched its didactic material within an elaborate portrayal of the marriage of the Philology, the personification of learning, to the winged god of eloquence Mercury. Capella was outside of the Roman elites of late antiquity and a detached bystander to the intellectual currents of the time. However, while more scholarly liberal arts textbooks fell into obscurity *De Nuptiis* was prolific. Stahl (Stahl 1971: 22) warns us not to underestimate the influence of the book in the later revival of Roman and Greek learning since it passed the Greco-Roman curriculum onto generations of medieval students. Taylor (1901: 49) would go as far to insist the *De Nuptiis* was ‘was perhaps the most widely used schoolbook of the Middle Ages’. *De Nupttiis* survives in two hundred and fifty medieval manuscripts, a surprising number for such a particular work (Leonardi 1959). Indeed, sixth century Gallo-Roman historian and bishop Gregory of Tours would state that ‘our Martianus has instructed us in the seven disciplines’ (Gregory of Tours 1974 p 603). The setting of the liberal arts within allegory and myth seems not to have been unappealing to its medieval readers and its completeness and amenable size added to its success among students. Dill (1898: 412) states that it is ‘difficult to conceive of a state of culture where a mixture of dry traditional school learning and tasteless and extravagant mythological ornament, applied to the most incongruous material, with an absolutely bizarre effect, could have been applauded as a sweetener of the toils of learning.’ Yet, along with Cassiodorus and Isidore of Seville, it was Capella who was key in establishing the medieval tradition of the seven liberal arts. Cassidorus’ *Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning* may have awarded the seven arts respectability and sanctity, but Martianus bequeathed them popularity with Capella’s allegorical representations of the arts punctuating across medieval arts and poetry. As Curtius (1990) notes tapestries depicting Martianus’ seven ladies of the arts are hung in the monastery of Cluny, appear on the facades of the cathedrals of Chartes, Notre Dame de Paris and Leon, and inhabit the work of Botticelli.

The purpose of this paper is seeking to locate Capella’s educational thought and his approach to the liberal arts. Focussing on education as a form of embellishment, or adornment, of the self, it seeks to examine whether Capella’s approach to education may be regarded as a folly of vanity or possibly something more malignant in the spirit of Rousseau’s inflamed *amour propre*. If so, is vanity necessarily a cardinal sin in relation to intellectual practice in relation to the modern academic or is productive? In doing this one is seeking to engage in a conversation with Capella, a process where one seeks to draw out what is noteworthy, strange or worthwhile within the context of contemporary educational discussion, seeking to enable what Gadamer (1975) would refer to as a productive understanding of a work. Arendt in her essay on Walter Benjamin (1969: 51) refers to how with past writings ‘the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things “suffer a sea-change” and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements.’ Arendt casts Benjamin’s approach as seeking that which still speaks. However this is less that straightforward, Capella’s work is genre defying and riddled with flippancy, irony and humour. It is a work also that is hard to appreciate fully without the incongruousness of Capella’s modest status alongside the baroque style of the work and the grandeur of its claims for learning.

Yet, within the original allegorical sections of *De Nuptiis* it is possible to tease out an interpretation of Capella’s vision of education. This is not necessarily a simple task as the work is notoriously difficult to categorise; it may be read as a didactic textbook with lavish ornamentation or a Menippean satire which is a parody of encyclopaedic learning; or a schizophrenic work with didactic sections running alongside parody of the whole enterprise which there is no other example in the classical world. Or it may be read as a parody of itself ‘mocking and destabilising the literary genres present it in’ (Cardigini 2019, p.192-193). There is undoubtedly an irony that pervades the work that continues to confound. There is, however, a distinct Neo-Platonic thread in Capella’s thought where pursuing what was most excellent leads to the ultimate purpose of ascension of the soul towards the divine. For Capella, learning, via the liberal arts, is the most successful method of refining of the individual to its most graceful state, even if that learning may later be discarded for greater wisdom in the process of ascension (see Reihlan 1985). Capella embraces Plotinus’ exhortation that to achieve happiness one must pursue the divine within. Plotinus optimistically declares in *Ennads* ‘Let everyone become divine, become beautiful, if he wishes to contemplate God and the beautiful’ (*Ennads* I.II.I). Neo-Platonism is a particularly individualistic philosophy; with deification of the self and reunion with the One being the ultimate goal. The cardinal virtues’ main role is purification for ascension rather than being an aim in themselves. It is the philosophical life and a denial of concern of the body that is key; with focus on the social and material world a waste and a distraction. Capella may not have fully embraced, or fully understood, the more metaphysical nature of Neo-Platonism. He shoes no interest in denial of the body or the philosopher’s life. However, it is from this milieu that, for Capella, education may be seen as a form of self-adornment with learning providing the soul with whatever ‘beauty and embellishment’ the soul is able to acquire (*De Nuptiis* 23). For Capella, the treasures of a Croesus or a Darius are contemptible besides the treasures of learning (*De Nuptiis* 578). Capella litters the heavens with people of learning, elevated by their academic achievements and mastery of the arts, including Cicero, Plato, Socrates and Euclid.

Capella may place a form of self-deification as the higher goal, but his thinking lacked the philosophical dimensions of thinkers such as Plotinus. He was dismissive of philosophy, and philosophers in themselves, who he dismisses as ‘abstruse and ostentatious’ (*De Nuptiis* 812). He belittles ‘starveling philosophers’ who are barefoot or shaggy with uncut hair, or with bodies half covered with filthy mantles (*De Nuptiis* 578). Capella seemed to have little regard for the ascetic route Neo-Platonists commonly advocated for return towards the One, which is the philosopher’s life with a dedicated training of the mind and a denial of the body. He also lacked the scholar’s commitment shown, for example, in Cassiodorus *Institutions*, the traditional scholarly virtues appear secondary for him. *De Nuptiis* is full of errors, some of which Capella appears to be aware of, but fails to correct. Where Neoplatonism placed unity with the One as the highest goal; it is hard to place Capella’s hollowed-out Neo-Platonism as he lacks the ascetic and philosophical dimensions of thinkers such as Plotinus or Porphyry. He seems to place individual embellishment as the goal, with vanity as the purest form of educational motivation. Yet despite what may be expected, Capella stops himself from being an unsympathetic figure. He is humourful, self-depreciating and strikingly human throughout *De Nuptiis*. If he is weaving gold chains from the treasures of Darius, he is aware that he is a poor jeweller.

I

Our understandings of the life of Martianus Capella arise from *The Marriage of Mercury and Philology*, little else in known about him apart from what is contained in this text. Most scholars advocate a date for Martianus’ work between the Vandal sack of Rome in 410 and the Vandal Gaiseric’s crossing to the North African shores in 429; or a decade later during the occupation of Cathage in 439 (See Willis 1952: 6 -8; Duckett 1938: 224; Sandys 1906: 241-242). Martianus describes himself as a man ‘in his declining years’ (*De Nuptiis* 999) with ‘a head sprinkled with whitening hairs and multiplied by ten (*decuriatum*) with the increments of the lustra’ (*De Nuptiis* 2). It is suggested that the use of the word *decuriatum* (which means multipled by ten with fivefold increases) in the preface denotes a man of fifty years old. Martianus did not belong to the Roman elite as may be drawn from his weak Latin and his complaints about poverty (*De Nuptiis* 997). Capella recognises the limitations of his work and is goaded in the text by the personification of Satire for wasting ink (*De Nuptiis* 576) on writings she describes as rustic and trivial (*De Nuptiis* 997) and nothing more than ‘trifles’ (*De Nuptiis* 1000).

On his occupation, there are chasms between presumptions ranging from Parker’s argument (1890:424-444) that he was a self-taught peasant, to Leonardi’s claims that he rose to become proconsul of Africa (1956: 215). Parker based his conclusion on Capella’s poor Latin and his claim in the epilogue (*De Nuptiis* 999) that he lived in poverty among poor herdsmen. The assumption that he was a proconsul are based upon the end lines of the work, which are heavily corrupted, ‘giving to the high office of proconsul a bumble bee separated from his blossoms by the sickle’ (*De Nuptiis* 999). If could be interpreted that Capella is saying that he, himself, is the bumble bee and he is giving himself to the office of proconsul. However, an alternative interpretation could rather suppose that he was presenting legal cases before the proconsul.

If Capella was presenting legal cases in front of the proconsul, this would support the more common assumption that he was a lawyer or a rhetorician (Teuffel and Schwabe 1892: 447, Curtius 1990, Raby 1953: 101, Morelli 1909: 250). Throughout *De Nuptiis*, there are references to legal technicalities and most of his book on rhetoric comprises of guidance on arguing legal cases (*De Nuptiis* 41, 443-475, 498-503, 553-65; Stahl 1971:19).

We know little of Capella motivations in composing *De Nuptiis*. Why this modestly educated, possibly self-educated, Cathagian living in a rural community, who refers to his time in the markets, bartering in petty court room disputes, far from the circles of the aristocracy or philosophers, would embark on such a grand undertaking. Other key transmitters of the liberal arts and the Greco-Roman educational tradition came from the Roman elites, both Boethius and Cassidorus, were *magister officiorum*, the highest official, for the Ostrogothic Kings and Augustine was Bishop of Hippo and before that a professor of rhetoric.

Despite his success as populariser of the seven liberal arts and an influential figure in the history of western educational thought, it is difficult to find a figure as widely derided by scholars. Critics were harsh on the Carthaginian’s achievement, with the work being labelled strange, grotesque, bizarre and ineptly decadent. In *A Handbook of Latin Literature* Rose (1936, p.438) was blunt in describing *De Nuptiis* as the ‘dullest and poorest stuff imaginable’. Willis (1952, p.7) doubted the author’s sanity ‘...our author is capable of such stupidity in the use of his sources it is a credible assumption that Martianus was not a *sanus homo*.’ A more measured critic Stahl (1971 p.39) tells us that ‘Martianus’ obscure and florid style repeatedly reveals his inadequacies as a writer.’

As C.S. Lewis notes, *De Nuptiis* is a strange beast. *De Nuptiis* is, at its base, a textbook providing an elementary introduction to the liberal arts. The books on the arts are compilations from mainly Latin sources such as Aquila Romanus, Geminus, Pliny the Elder, Quintilian, and Iulius Solinus. Yet, Capella choose to package his educational text in elaborate Roman and Greek myth and ornate poetry and prose. His pretentious style, sub-standard Latin and obscure phraseology may have provoked the ire of critics, but his strange decision to package the liberal arts in an elaborate mythical tale seemed to appeal to early medieval sensibilities and provide access to sources that were lost. There was awareness of Capella’s weaknesses among his medieval audience with the ninth century Irish Platonist John Scotus Eriugena accusing Capella of pretending to be a philosopher and, with poetic licence, mixing the false with the true reasons of philosophy (Cardigni 2019: 190). Yet whatever its faults, *De Nuptiis* demonstrates Capella’s infectious, if hyperbolic, admiration for the power and functionality of the knowledge he was seeking to impart. The striking originality of Capella’s work comes from how he defies genre in the dressing of the textbooks. *De Nuptiis* is framed as a marriage between Mercury, the Roman divinity of eloquence, and Philology, the personification of secular learning. This has particular significance since in Cicero’s *De oratore*, the orator is more accomplished that the philosopher due to the combination of rhetorical command alongside mastery of learning. Furthermore, in his own idiosyncratic fashion, Capella discusses the meaning, purpose and worth of education in a richer sense than is usual, or expected, for educational textbooks of the period.

The first two books of *De Nuptiis* are divided into the betrothal and the marriage. In the betrothal Mercury searches for a wife and fails in his bid to marry Phronesis (Wisdom), Prophecy or Psyche (Soul). He is advised by Virtue, the embodiment of human virtue, to seek Apollo who proposes Philology, the most learned daughter of the ancients. To the pleasure of Virtue, Mercury accepts the match. All three fly through the heavens, serenaded by the spheres, eventually reaching the palace of Jupiter, the first among the gods. Jupiter raises his concern about Mercury’s new love Philology distracting him from his duties to the King of the Gods, so Athena, the goddess of learning, proposes to assemble a council of the gods to decide the matter. On the proposal of Jupiter, the council accepts the union, but it is stated that it is necessary that Philology should become a god, like her proposed spouse.

Books I and II are set among the Olympian Gods within the celestial spheres rather than Mount Olympus. Stahl notes that within this section there is a blend of Neo-Pythagoreanism, old Roman and Etruscan religious ideas, some Neoplatonic concepts, some Egyptian deities, more than a trace of Hermeticism (Stahl 1971: 83-84). Capella’s religious beliefs are set within a Neo-Platonic explanation of the universe and the religious myth is structured to accommodate this. This is a somewhat erratic fusion as at some points he will switch between traditional Olympic beliefs to Neo-Platonic theological constructs, for example in his treatment of Jupiter at the start of Book VII, reflecting assumptions of the time that there could be reconciliation and synthesis between philosophies and religion.

In Book II the wedding preparations are narrated. Athanasia, the daughter of Apothesis, concocts a potion of immortality for Philology which she consumes after firstly disgorging books and parchments that represent her earthly learning. When she ascends to heaven she meets Juno, the wife of Jupiter, queen of the gods and goddess of marriage, who guides her and introduces her to knowledge of the celestial regions and their inhabitants. A reading of the Roman marriage law takes places by Phronesis in front of Mercury and Philology and the wedding gifts are presented. Then Apollo, presents the seven liberal arts, Grammar, Dialectic and Rhetoric (the trivium) and Geometry, Arithmetic, Astronomy and Harmony (the quadrivium).

In the following seven books, the seven arts present themselves. These books take the form of an elementary handbook in which the art’s avatars describe their merits at the start of each book before shifting into a conventional handbook. There is usually an epilogue as well. Capella’s work, along with Cassidorus’ *Institutions*, is held as one of the most influential in deciding on seven as the number of the liberal arts, along with Boethius, Isidore of Seville and Cassiodorus (Parker 1890). Capella mentions the two additional liberal arts of medicine and architecture, though the personifications of these disciplines are not permitted to address themselves to the gods since they dwell on mundane and earthly matters (*De Nuptiis* 891).

The story appears to be entirely the author's own creation; but much of the learned mythological and philosophical material, included in the first two books, and the handbooks on grammar, dialectic, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music in the last seven are drawn, as mentioned, directly from other sources. He seems to avoid what he seems to regard as dry and unengaging scholarship e.g. his book on geometry dedicates its attention to a pleasing tour of the Mediterranean over geometry proper. What is original to Capella is the mystical and allegorical construction of learning and education that he wraps his texts books within. Capella seems to have absorbed ideas of the time rather than necessarily forming them into a coherent approach and there is a particularly religious character of *De Nuptiis*, as you would expect, with the central allegory of a divinely ordained union of learning and eloquence and the theurgical aspects of Neo-Platonists such as Iamblichus.

II

Capella adopts his own very particular take on the role of learning one influenced by Neo-Platonic approaches but inconsistently applied. There is an acknowledgement that learning’s highest aim should consists of seeking to develop the most divine part of the soul, the intellect, the highest sphere accessible to the human mind. Therefore, emphasis is placed on disciplines which appear to focus purely on reason, and on abstract concerns, such as mathematics and philosophy, despite his lack of enthusiasm for the latter. Subjects which *De Nuptiis* dismisses, such as architecture and medicine (*De Nuptiis* 891), are of lower forms and not fit for the gods or the divine portion of the soul since they dwell on earthly matters (see O’Neill 2022). However, with Capella, this may solely be due to his lack of interest in the subjects. The classical virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude are granted esteem, but rather as an accoutrement than in application. Since Neo-Platonism emphasised contemplation as the highest good, and contained contempt for earthly concerns, it was open to mystic interpretations. Though Plotinus held reason as supreme, others such as Iamblichus, emphasised the use of prayer, rituals and allegory in bridging the divide between God and man and Capella seems to place considerable worth on this.

The intellect provides a route to attaining the soul’s ascent to the higher levels of being and the allegory of the marriage of Mercury and Philology shows the importance of the learned arts in facilitating this. Capella, however, goes beyond this and asserts that the intellect allows the mind to discover laws that are even binding upon the gods and Jupiter himself. Apollo, sun god and patron of Delphi, in introducing Philology to the gods points to this impetuous ability; ‘very often she has rights over us, impelling gods under compulsion to obey her decrees; she knows that what no power of heaven can attempt against Jove’s will, she can attain.’ (*De Nuptiis* 22)

There is an aspect of *De Nuptiis* that seeks to advise the wise person to seek to master the learned arts and the gift of eloquence to best contend with the Fates, the Moirai, who put into play the decisions of the gods. Apollo indifferently states that ‘what the gods decide is law, heaven’s decisions cause us no wistfulness, for necessity is whatever is pleasing to us’ (*De Nuptiis* 21). In such a fickle world, Martianus advocates no moral code besides seeking learning and knowledge to aid one in understanding what binds the lesser gods and what pleases the supreme god Jupiter, often synonymous with the One, from whom all power, including that of the gods, emanates. Like Boethius in *The Consolations of Philosophy*, for Martianus, learning is central in coming to terms with the arbitrary nature of the world.

Learning is not meek in her embodiment and the glorification she bestows. Philology is presented as the embodiment of earthly learning and she is recommended to Mercury by Virtue, the goddess of human moral virtue, who praises the powers of her knowledge (*De Nuptiis* 22). Philology is cast as being essential to eloquence. In the opening of Book II, Philology is cast as picking small herbs before she notices Mercury, which Remigius of Auxerre (1962) interpreted as suggesting that the eloquence Mercury personifies is only attainable once that the seven liberal arts have been mastered. This interpretation is complementary to the ninth century interpretation of *De Nuptiis*, adopted by Johannes Scotus Eriugena, which saw the marriage as the Ciceronian marriage of wisdom (Sapentia) and eloquence (*eloquentia*) (*De Invent.* 1.1).

Alternatively, *De Nuptiis* may be seen as a chronicle of the decline and subsequent ascent of the soul. The fall of the soul into generation deprives Mercury of a bride and initiates the rise of Philology. This becomes a story of the rise of the descended part of the soul to her true divine origins. Mathon (1969) and Lenaz (1980) argued that Philology may be portrayed as representing the soul with Mathon arguing that the *De Nuptiis* is a symbolic version of the Neo-Platonic return of the soul to God (Mathon 1969: 106). Lenaz (1980) postulates that the marriage of Mercury and Philology may be a version of the Gnostic *salvator salvandas* myth where Philology represents the descended portion of the human soul, which must be redeemed by Mercury, who represents the divine portion of the soul. He further suggests that the three maidens in Book I, that Mercury considers marrying, Wisdom, Prophecy and Psyche (soul) represent the three parts of the soul, which Philology is the unity of (Lenaz 1980: 107). Lenaz (1980) draws parallels with the Valentinian myth of Sophie Achamoth, to suggest that the marriage of Philology and Mercury reflect the formation of a complete soul with both the divine and mortal components united. When Juno seeks to convince Jupiter about the marriage, Jupiter is concerned that Mercury’s adoration of his wife would make him ‘slothful and indolent, drowsy and languid’ and he would refuse to act as his messenger (*De Nuptiis* 35). Within the Lenaz interpretation, this may be read as concerns that the mortal soul, the seat of the passions, may disrupt the immortal part of the soul.

There is a specific advocacy for the liberal arts in themselves rather as propaedeutic to philosophy in *De Nuptiis*. In the opening of Book II, Philology is welcomed by nine muses and inspired in her journey to heaven. The muses serenade Philology, ‘Ascend into the temples of the heaven, maiden, deserving of such a marriage; your father-in-law Jupiter asks you to rise to the lofty stars’ (*De Nuptiis* 117). Shanzer (1986: 41) notes the different treatment of the muses in *De Nuptiis* compared to Boethius’ *Consolations*. In *Consolations* the muses lurk round the bed of Boethius to be dismissed by Philosophy as harlots and sirens. Shanzer (1986: 41) interestingly comments that this scene gains power if read as a polemic against Martianus’ mode of ascent, which praises the liberal arts as a route to heaven while philosophy is dismissed and plays no part in this. On the contrary, Boethius allows Philosophy to scold the poetical Muses as 'tragical harlots' who 'kill the fruitful crop of reason' (*De Consolatione* I.1); and later, in Book II, he hears Philosophy identify Music as 'a little slave belonging to [her] house' (*De Consolatione* II,l). The parallels between *De Nuptiis* and *Consolations* continue in that Martianus work may be read as an epic redemption myth. Following philosophy and seeking to understand God is the only route to salvation for Boethius whereas the liberal arts provide this route for Martianus. Shazner’s reading marks the different views of learning taken by Boethius and Martianus, Martianus deems mastery of the liberal arts as hopeful and an aim in itself, whereas, Boethius casts this as only a route to philosophy, that ultimately leads to God.

Alternatively, Relihan (1987) argues that Martianus’ uses the form of the Menippean Satire to parody encyclopaedic knowledge. It is based upon quite an adventurous premise that *De Nuptiis* is not a didactic textbook of the liberal arts, as it was used throughout the Middle Ages, rather it seeks to teach the limits of learning and the dividing line between information and wisdom.

Reilhan points to a passage which describes Philology’s preparation for the marriage. Philology is guided by Philosophy, who can freely travel to the heavens and admit others to the heavens, reflecting the Ciceronian belief that those of exceptional merit can enter heaven and live alongside the gods (*De natura deorum* 2.62 *De legibus* 2.10) (*De Nuptiis* 131). The personification of Immortality tells Philology that she has been ordered that she be elevated ‘to the courts of heaven in this royal palanquin, which no earthborn creature may touch’ (*De Nuptiis* 131). She is instructed to drink an elixir but before this she is instructed to vomit forth books of earthly learning which choke her breast and prevent her taking the throne of immortality.

The girl strained hard and with great effort vomited up the weight she was carrying in her breast. Then that nausea and laboured vomit turned into a stream of writings of all kinds. One could see what books and what great volumes and the works of how many languages flowed from the mouth of the maiden. There were some made of papyrus which had been smeared with cedar oil, other books were woven of rolls of linen, many were of parchment, and a very few were written on linden bark....

But while the maiden was bringing up such matter in spasms, several young women, of whom some are called the Arts, and others the Disciplines, were straightaway collecting whatever the maiden brought forth from her mouth, each one of them taking material for her own essential use and particular skill. Even the muses themselves, especially Urania and Calliope, gathered volumes into their laps. In some of these books the pages were marked with musical notation and were very long; in others there were circles and straight lines and hemispheres, together with triangles and squares and polygonal shapes drawn to suit the different theorems and elements; then a representation joined together the limbs of various animals into a particular species (*De Nuptiis* 136-138).

This does seem to appear as a shedding of human knowledge to achieve immortality with Philology leaving behind what initially made her appeal to Mercury. Yet following on from Lenaz’s (1980) interpretation, if Philology is regarded as the fallen soul seeking ascent, this is perfectly in keeping, though Lenaz put forward the qualifier that she is shedding only false knowledge rather than all earthly knowledge (*De Nuptiis* 23-35).

Reilhan (1987: 63) reads this ascent being dependent on a rejection of earthly knowledge in order to understand the unknown in a similar fashion to the leap of faith in Augustine’s *De Ordinare*. He believes that at this point at the end of Book II, Philology receives a glimpse of ultimate truth, however, as soon as earthly learning returns in the form of the seven maidens of the liberal arts this highest stage of wisdom is lost. He insists ‘One might say that there are two heavens in *De Nuptiis*; Philology perceives the true one when emptied of her learning; but as she gets her learning back she becomes a member of the false one, the traditional comic and Homeric Olympus of Menippean satire, known from Seneca and various dialogues of Lucian’ (Reilhan 1987: 64). The *De Nuptiis* forms a divide between two types of knowledge, earthly learning and the higher Neo-Platonic mystical truth. Earthly knowledge at its face value qualifies one only for the absurd and Homeric heaven which praises the virtues of the seven liberal arts, rather than the higher union with the One.

According to this understanding *De Nuptiis* rather than a didactic handbook is a parody of learning that seeks to make fun of the grander claims of learning.

It is pointless to deny that there is intelligence and humour at play in a work of groundbreaking novelty and breathtaking scope; or to reject the very sound advice that Martianus gives to his son and to us, that truth lies beyond details, that facts are no substitute for wisdom, and that learning is meaningless unless it erects a structure from which one leaps into the unknown.’ (Reilhan 1987: 66)

Reilhan’s interpretation has a pessimism regarding the value of liberal arts, which it is hard to believe that Capella shares. The high regard for the power of learning he presents infuses the books. In Book I he makes a strong statement asserting the power of learning to bring beauty and immortality to the soul (*De Nuptiis* 23). Before learning, Psyche is supposed to have led a humble existence yet she has ‘been so refined by Philology that whatever beauty and embellishment Psyche had she acquired from the polish Philology gave her; for the maiden had shown Psyche so much affection that she strove constantly to make her immortal’ (*De Nuptiis* 23). The soul’s enrichment is via learning.

In Book II, the Muses, far from the malevolent sirens of Boethius, line up to praise Philology on her entry to heaven. Erato, the muse of lyric and love poetry, labels Philology the ‘source of arts’ and ‘rightly is the world subject to you, since it was from the beginning apprehended by your rational principles,’ to her ‘secrets unknown to others are known to you alone’ (*De Nuptiis* 123). Clio, the Muse of history, praises the rhetorical ability of Philology who can ‘link together contrary arguments, building up sophisms by heaping together arguments, now binding something together by rule of grammar, clever at using your fine speech to play with words with double meaning destroy the ordinary sense’ (*De Nuptiis* 122). Calliope, the muse of heroic and epic poetry, praises her ability to compose religious music, to chant and prepare sacred songs and prophecies for the Muses (*De Nuptiis* 119). Polymania, the muse of mime and also associated with rhythm, praises her ability to arrange rhythms, melodies and tones which she believes can raise the mind to the heavens (*De Nuptiis* 120). Melpomene, the muse of tragic drama, praises her ability to adorn comedy and tragedy with her songs. Terpisochore, the Muse of the dance, says that her industry and genius have brought her sight of the stars. Indeed, before the wedding is to take place the four cardinal virtues Prudence, Justice, Temperance, Fortitude approach embrace and kiss Philology (*De Nuptiis* 134). Thalia, the muse of Comedy, ends the Muses’ song with the declaration that Jupiter blesses the liberal arts as well as the Muses.

It is true that Martianus is quick to jettison pomposity of learned scholars, philosophers and even himself, but that should not be confused with his dismissal of learning, particularly that embodied in the seven liberal arts. Throughout *De Nuptiis*,Martianus emphasises no other route than learning as it is through this that man is able to enrich her soul, foster eloquence, understand the law of nature and commune with the divine.

III.

The nature of Capella’s work opens itself to a multitude of interpretations, which is surprising for what is in essence a school textbook of which a large proportion is derived from other sources. There is learning as an accoutrement and decoration. Learning in a symbiotic relationship with eloquence, grasping for the Ciceronian ideal. There is learning as the path to divinisation via the liberal arts. Learning being a means to cope with the arbitrary nature of fate. There are the interpretations that emphasis the Neo-Platonic aspect, that see Philology’s ascent as the return of the soul towards the One (Mathon 1969, Lenaz 1980, Shazner 1986). There is a *De Nuptiis* as a parody of encyclopaedic knowledge that distinguishes between information and true wisdom, that asserts earthly learning is meaningless unless it allows that leap into the unknown (Relihan 1987). At the same time, it may be read as a warning against the pretensions of philosophy that salutes the muses as an end in themselves, rather than as a path to philosophy. *De Nuptiis* may be admired for its sheer optimism and overpowering enthusiasm for learning. However, at the same time the purpose of Capella’s parody may be intended, as Cardigni (2019: 216) eloquently argues, to ‘bring Classical Antiquity to a close, shutting off discourse and offering silence as a literary category.’

At a less esoteric level, Capella’s view of education is undoubtedly individualist and focussed on the glorification of the self. He bravely mocks the pomposity of learned scholars while clinging to an innate respect for the power of learning to elevate the soul. That is not to say that Capella is not aware of his failings. He is constantly mocked in the text by Satura being accused of being an ass, not recognising Lady Philosophy, being accused wasting huge quantities of midnight oil and having his brain numbed by pettifoggery in the courts which prevent him from more noble occupations.

Yet it is Capella’s lack of coherence and his often ineptitude in learning, while praising its powers, that allow Capella to present a particularly interesting educational perspective. Stripped of the elegant metaphysics of emanation and union with the One, we have an approach to education that does speak to the often-undiscussed vanity of educational endeavour. Certainly, learning does sometimes have a noble or altruistic purpose and undoubtedly a wider purpose for the good. However, as with any human behaviour, there is always some form of vanity involved, and educational endeavour is not exempt from such motivations. Capella feels no need for meekness. He was writing at a time when pride had fewer negative connotations than what Christianity’s growing reach fostered. Aristotle, for example, is perfectly accepting of the proud man if his claims are in accordance with his merits, vanity is cast as claiming more than one is worthy, similarly humility, rather than a virtue, is cast in an equal aberration as vanity (*Ethics* 3). Possibly Capella’s motivation in composing *De Nuptiis* could be social respect, position and esteem through learning, and certainly some scholars would say this was seeking merit that he did not fully deserve. Freud (1914) may see in the writing of *De Nuptiis* a form of narcissistic self-investment, a display of an idealised self-image, where admiration from others is sought to reinforce self-esteem and seek external validation.

This raises the question whether vanity is such a bad thing in relation to education. To have individualist self-glorification as a prime motivation. The university sector measures itself by prestige and status and is dripping with titles, gowns and honours that are deemed essential to its functioning. The academic discourse surrounding higher education does tacitly acknowledge this, if avoiding the perceived charge of vanity itself. Yet academic vanity is a familiar trope in literature, for example, *Lucky Jim* by Kingsley Amis (1954), *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith (2005) and *The History Man* by Malcolm Bradbury (1975). It is interesting to note the academic controversy provoked by Carey’s *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992) which challenged the sanctity of intellectual authority and drew attention to the elitist attitudes of modernist writers and intellectuals.

Vanity, let alone intellectual vanity, has not necessarily been a matter of great consequence to moral philosophers. However, there was an expected philosophical interest with the rise of commercial society, and pride and vanity (often used interchangeably) gained attention from Hume (1983), Smith (2012), Mandeville (1957), Kant (2012) and Rousseau (1991, 2018). For Mandeville, Capella’s vanity would matter little. All virtuous activity, including the educational, is due to vanity and love of praise and often a public good arises from a private vice. Cappella’s vanity motivated a work, whatever its faults, that is regarded as a significant influence in the later revival of Roman and Greek learning. Similarly, Hume was not greatly worried by vanity and pride (which he used interchangeably). Hume remarked that ‘vanity is so closely allied to virtue, and to love the fame of laudable actions approaches so near the love of laudable actions for their own sake, that these passions are more capable of mixture, than any other kinds of affection’ (Hume, 1985, p. 86). Reed (2012) argues that in Hume there is an alliance between virtue and vanity which reinforces weak moral sentiments with the much stronger dominant self-interested passions. Adam Smith (*TMS*) challenge’s Mandeville’s contention that the desire for praise, and actions arising, from it should be labelled vicious, rather he condemns the love of undeserved praise. Smith argues that the desire for praise and respect comes to regulate all human conduct. Luban (2021 p. 284) notes that for Smith the desire for wealth is not about the ease or trinkets it provides, but rather it is vanity that motivates beyond the satisfaction of basic needs and seeks social status relative to other people.

Kant and Rousseau see a darker force at play with vanity. Firstly Kant, echoing Newman (1996) in an educational context, asserts that those things that are worthy should be sought for their own sake rather than praise and glory. He sees vanity as a vice with vicious consequences. The ambitious person characterised by vanity seeks to force and compel the judgements of others (Nyugen 1999 p.613-617). Rousseau in *Emile* identifies vanity as a uniquely dangerous vice and inflamed *amour prope* is uniquely inegalitarian since it destroys mutual deference to others and leads to the desire to dominate to satisfy the need for praise. Smith also recognises that vanity leads to the promotion of asymmetrical relations of power and lead to the desire to seek esteem through vertical relations of superiority. The criticisms of vanity by Kant, Smith and Rousseau shine a light on some of the consequences of vanity, if it is identified as such or not. In the rigidly hierarchical nature of most academic institutions and forums the presence of the need to dominate based on perceived superiority and esteem, apparent or real, is not a baseless claim.

Alternatively, Capella’s embrace of self-glorification can be seen as an unapologetic act of narcissism. Freud’s (1914) conception of narcissism as a developmental stage and form of ego investment illuminates *De Nuptiis* as a textual embodiment of self-love masquerading as encyclopaedic learning. Yet, as Leo Bersani argues, narcissism may not signify egoic inflation but rather a resistance to relational norms and social teleology (2009). In this sense, Capella’s apparent vanity gestures toward a deeper refusal to subordinate learning to utility or morality, aligning with Bersani’s vision of narcissism as a subversive aesthetic stance. Maurice Blanchot (1955), too, finds in self-reflection not affirmation, but a destabilisation of the subject. Capella’s oscillation between pompous erudition and satirical self-effacement mirrors Blanchot’s notion that literary self-expression reveals the void rather than the self. Capella as someone whose vanity turns into self-deconstruction: beneath the scholarly posing is a deep, ironic awareness of the limits of knowledge and expression. Bojesen (2020) adds a further dimension, suggesting that education is always entangled with the formation of the self, narcissism is not a moral failing, but a structural condition of educational experience: to learn, to teach, or to write is always partly to seek self-affirmation and to make oneself visible. Self-investment and ego are inseparable from the desire to know in an ethically complex relationship. Capella’s work, then, may be seen not as an encyclopaedia, but as a deliberate staging of the paradoxes inherent in intellectual vanity: that the pursuit of knowledge often masks, yet depends on, a profound desire for recognition and self-reinvention.

Capella performs a service in placing self-glorification so central that it challenges the reader to consider vanity within learning and educational motivation. In *De Nuptiis*, we encounter a complex interplay of vanity and self-glorification, tempered by an underlying modesty and a genuine appreciation for the pursuit of knowledge and the potential of the liberal arts. Capella does not shy away from the notion that educational endeavour may be heavily motivated by vanity and that the glorification of the self is worthy aim. There are echoes of Bersani in Capella’s disregard for utility or morality. It destabilizes the idea that education must serve a progressive social goal or contribute to collective moral improvement. Despite individualistic and asocial tendencies in his approach to education, Capella’s portrayals also reveal a humorous self-deprecation; he is aware of his own limitations and invites the reader to critique the pomposity often associated with academia. He frequently mocks scholars, presenting himself as both an enthusiastic scholar and a flawed figure who is conscious of his educational ineptitude. The title of this paper is a nod to the humour and irony present in Capella’s work. Narcissus’s vanity led to his mortal demise, however it also leads to the perennial flowering of daffodils in spring. Capella challenges the notion that vanity is inherently negative within educational endeavours. Philosophers such as Hume recognised an alliance between virtue and vanity, supporting the idea that the desire for recognition, status and praise can drive individuals to achieve laudable actions, recognising the dual nature of vanity—as both a deplorable vice and a catalyst for achievement. Capella’s narrative ultimately allows for a unique perspective on learning that both elevates and critiques the academic pursuit. This duality prompts a conversation about the role of vanity in the broader context of intellectual practice and the complexity of educational motivations. It highlights the messiness of learning and the impurity of educational desire.

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